Americans Toss Out 40 Percent of All Food

by Robert Roy Britt

U.S. residents are wasting food like never before.

While many Americans feasted on turkey and all the fixings yesterday, a new study finds food waste per person has shot up 50 percent since 1974. Some 1,400 calories worth of food is discarded per person each day, which adds up to 150 trillion calories a year.

The study finds that about 40 percent of all the food produced in the United States is tossed out.

Meanwhile, while some have plenty of food to spare, a recent report by the Department of Agriculture finds the number of U.S. homes lacking "food security," meaning their eating habits were disrupted for lack of money, rose from 4.7 million in 2007 to 6.7 million last year.

About 1 billion people worldwide don't have enough to eat, according to the World Food Program.

Growing problem

The new estimate of food waste, published in the journal PLoS ONE, is a relatively straightforward calculation: It's the difference between the U.S. food supply and what's actually eaten, which was estimated by using a model of human metabolism and known body weights.

The result, from Kevin Hall and colleagues at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, is about 25 percent higher than similar estimates made in recent years.

Last year, an international group estimated that up to 30 percent of food - worth about $48.3 billion - is wasted each year in the United States. That report concluded that despite food shortages in many countries, plenty of food is available to feed the world, it just doesn't get where it needs to go.

Previous calculations were typically based on interviews with people and inspections of garbage, which Hall's team figures underestimates the waste.

Related problems

ScienceNOW, an online publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, reports that food waste occurs at the manufacturing level and in distribution, but more than half is wasted by consumers, according to a separate study earlier this year by Jeffery Sobal, a sociologist at Cornell University. Meanwhile, Hall and colleagues say a related and growing problem, obesity, may be fueled by the increased availability of food in this country and the incessant marketing of it. All that extra food is bad for the environment, too.

Addressing the oversupply of food in the United States "could help curb to the obesity epidemic as well as reduce food waste, which would have profound consequences for the environment and natural resources," the scientists write. "For example, food waste is now estimated to account for more than one quarter of the total freshwater consumption and more than 300 million barrels of oil per year representing about 4 percent of the total U.S. oil consumption."

USDA STUDY

In the United States, according to the USDA, twenty-seven percent of all the food produced each year is lost at the retail, consumer, and food service levels. That turns out to be about nearly 1.5 tons of food per year for every man, woman, and child in the United States who faces hunger. To put it another way, in the U.S. we throw away about 263,013,699 pounds of food a day... every single day! And much of what is wasted actually is just surplus food. It is perfectly edible.

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Americans are tossing $100 Billion of Food a Year

FOOD WASTE COSTING ECONOMY $100 BILLION, STUDY FINDS

It's just a matter of time before those staggering hikes in oil prices are translated into higher costs for food, reflecting the higher costs farmers pay for running diesel harvesters and using oil-based fertilizers and pesticides.

Timothy Jones, a University of Arizona archaeologist, says that makes the results of his studies of how much food is lost and thrown away very timely.

For the last eight years, Jones has spearheaded a government-financed study that has documented how more than 40 percent of food grown in the United States is lost or thrown away - at a cost of at least $100 billion annually to the economy and over-taxing the soil and environment.

He said Americans - from the farm to the kitchen - aren't aware of the huge amounts of food losses, and cooks often don't think about the food they waste. Jones said even the experts were wrong - by a factor of two, in fact - in guessing how much food is lost through the food chain, and he said at least half of the food discarded isn't really bad and could have been safely consumed.

"We've lost touch with food," said Jones at his Tucson office of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology. "People are totally unaware of food; it's true of everybody from the citrus industry to the person who takes a plate of spaghetti and meatballs they could have kept and instead throw it away."

Jones said Americans believe in the myth that food is cheap and plentiful. But he argued it's not cheap considering the labor and effort taken to grow it, and the costs of fuel to harvest and bring it to market. He also argued that there are no easily used lands left for new farms, and there are environmental costs from depleting soils and soil erosion that comes with intensive farming.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that about 12 percent of today's average household budget goes to buying food, but Jones said those estimates were made before the price of oil tripled from $20 a barrel last year to more than $60 a barrel currently.

Those oil-price increases, he said, will soon be translated into higher costs for food as oil is used not only to make diesel for tractors and harvesters, but also is the base from which fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides are made.

"I think we're looking at 15 to 20 percent of household budgets in a few years because of these energy costs," he said, pointing out that people can save money by throwing less away.

The food industry is increasingly aware of the costs of throwing away products headed for the market, which is affecting profit margins.

"Huge, staggering dollars are lost" to discarded produce, said Ron McCormick, vice president for produce for the giant supermarket chain Wal-Mart. He said it's not unusual for boxes of perishable produce to be misplaced in huge warehouses even while shelves in stores are empty and customers have to shop elsewhere.

McCormick said Wal-Mart is relying on new radio-controlled frequency chips to sort out its backroom problems and to try to ensure that a stream of fresh produce is always available for sale.

There are also large losses in restaurant salad and buffet bars. Mickey Dedajic, an 18-year-old immigrant who lived off rotting potatoes and rice during the siege of Sarajevo more than a decade ago, said he's astonished at the waste of food in America after working as a waiter and bus boy at an Alexandria, Va., hotel.

"Most of the time we run out of food, and there's more food in the garbage than on the buffet," he said. "People just aren't thinking about it."

While previous USDA studies looked at plate waste to judge the amount of food discarded, Jones examined garbage from stores and people who volunteered for the study all over the country, weighing the discarded materials and segregating it into food categories.

The losses from households were an eye-opener, he said. About 14 percent of the garbage involved perfectly good food that was in its original packaging and not out of date.

"I just don't understand this," said Jones. He suggested that bulk purchases at discount stores are resulting in people having too much food they are not used to keeping, and so are just throwing unopened portions away. About 34 percent of discarded edible food was dry-packaged goods, and 19 percent canned goods that keep a long time.

Another surprise from the study involved losses at fast-food restaurants, which publicly boast of their efficiency. Almost 10 percent of the food in fast-food restaurants was thrown out, the study found.

Jones said this was due to the inadequacies of refrigerators in stores. He said the fast-food industry moved to a "just-in-time" delivery system from company-owned regional warehouses in the last decade, instead of relying on local suppliers. But Jones said many fast-food stores had difficulties adjusting the delivery of food supplies in time for customers lining up in the drive-through lanes, and the individual stores lacked adequate refrigerators to store supplies.

The study found that large fast-food chains were more efficient than smaller chains. At some of the smaller chains, up to 50 percent of food was discarded. Jones concluded this high loss was due to high turnovers of novice store managers, who ordered too much food and misjudged how many customers they would have.

More than a quarter of the food prepared at convenience stores is discarded. Jones explained this is usually pizza or hot dogs that are cooked and kept under hot lights or on a grill until they are sold, or look unappetizing.

He said the massive waste costs the fast-food industry $30 billion to $35 billion a year and could be solved by redesigning stores to include proper storage areas and refrigerators. "By spending $50 million to $60 million, they could save $5 billion," he said.

Jones said the industry has made strides in storing and transporting fresh produce from the farm to the store with little losses. But Jones said that, at the farm level, the waste involved in putting together pre-prepared salads and sliced carrots has boosted produce losses from 3 percent to 10 percent. And his surveys found that about 10 percent of the broccoli, cauliflower and celery crops are left rotting in the fields. About 29 percent of the citrus crop is lost each year, largely because of the neglect of oranges.

Just reducing waste by a quarter would mean a $25 billion injection into the economy, Jones said.